New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

Volume XII, Number 27 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of December 17, 1951

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"Point of No Return"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 14, 1951

'Point of No Return' Opens at the Alvin

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

A great deal of "Point of No Return" has a peculiar affinity to a documentary moving picture. It is a factual analysis of a typical upper-class American trying to improve his ecopomic and social position.

The first act shows the banker at home and at work. He has a comely wife and two fine children. He labors in a big busy bank full of mahogany and marble, and wants to be vice president. He is the sort of fellow who occasionally gets restless at the thought that instead of having plays written about him, he will always be the audience.

He is upper class, but he is typical. He is successful because he conforms. His rebellions are rare and strictly domestic.

Rivalry and Unrest.

In the second act he returns to his old hometown. Thinking back, he recalls loving the town's rich girl, and the start of his ambition to move up in life. He remembers being rejected by the girl's father, after his own father has killed himself at the time of the '29 crash.

Finally in the third act, the play develops suspense and emotional conflict. Before that, there has only been rivalry and unrest. At last there is an electric situation, in the classic setup of the young wife trying to charm the boss, when a new job is at stake.

Not Striking Theater.

When hope seems lost, the younger banker confesses in all honesty that he never did care much for "success." But the play will not leave him even that distinction. He gets the promotion anyway. The moment of clarity when he hoped never to "creep" toward success, or to "polish another apple" again, is cut short with a "have your cake and eat it" ending.

A great many people will doubtless enjoy the expert "Point of No Return" because of its recognizable elements. They may also find a good deal of it tedious, and wonder at the advisability of using such unimaginative people as theatrical material.

Almost Too Easy.

This stuff is important in the fabric of American life. The play is not very striking theater because it has such limited dramatic comment to make about material which has been used before with hackneyed frequency in fiction and the theater.

Henry Fonda is so right as the banker it is almost too easy to take him for granted. He has the calm, the concern and warmth and puzzlement of all the young men who abandon romantic ideas to bolster up reliable traditions.

Leora Dana does a nice job of playing his very typical wife as a creature of humor and sporting behavior. She makes her a game gal of honest fiber.

Gives the Role Humor.

Some of the play's brightest moments are supplied by the happy meeting of John Cromwell with the most interesting character in the story. The young banker's father is a theorizing ne'er do-well, and as Cromwell plays him, has more charm than most of the other characters lumped together.

Frank Conroy gives the boss more humor than his lines seem to promise, and Colin Keith-Johnston is strikingly unyielding as the rich girl's father.

Next, only to Cromwell for happy casting, is Robert Ross as a seething anthropologist. He is irreverently the opposite of all the Fonda character drives toward. He also provides the play its constant parallel between modern society and primitive tribes.

"POINT OF NO RETURN"

Play by Paul Osborn, based on the novel by John P. Marquand; staged by H. C. Potter; settings by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Main Bocher; presented by Leland Hayward at the Alvin Theatre December 13, 1951. The cast:

Evelyn Gray.....Susan Harris
Nancy Gray.....Leora Dana
Bill Gray.....Keith Russell
Charles Gray.....Henry Fonda
Joe.....James Jolley
1st Teller.....Gene O'Donnell
1st Clerk.....Stanley Tackney
2nd Clerk..Heywood Hale Broun
2nd Teller.....Davis Roberts
Miss Marble....Madeleine King
Miss Dingle....Katherine Hynes
Roger Blakesley.....
Bartlett Robinson
Anthony Burton...Frank Conroy
Malcolm Bryant....Robert Ross
Conductor....James MacDonald
Jackie Mason.....Phil Arthur
Jessica Lovell...Patricia Smith
Laurence Lovell.....
Colin Keith-Johnston
John Gray.....John Cromwell
Esther Gray....Frances Bavier
Tailor.....Pitt Herbert
Mrs. Burton...Madeleine Clive
Maid.....Harriet Selby

DAILY NEWS

December 14, 1951

'Point of No Return' Is Good News For Playgoers: It's Worth Seeing!

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Point of No Return," which opened last evening at the Alvin, is just about all a playgoer can expect of a comedy, and it brings a great lift to the local stage. It is intelligent, literate, witty and well made, and is admirably acted and staged. The amateurs and semi-pros who have had—and have given me—such a struggle during so much of the season which began last Fall may now be forgotten, for a group of professionals have taken charge on W. 52d St.

These professionals include, more or less in the order of their importance, John P. Marquand, who wrote the novel on which the play is based; Paul Osborn, who made the play from the novel; a number of factors, including Henry Fonda, Leora Dana, Robert Ross, Frank Conroy, John Cromwell and Patricia Smith; H. C. Potter, a director of splendid taste, and Jo Mielziner, a scene designer who always makes his settings a part of the play. Behind this delightful theatrical project is Leland Hayward, the producer who put it together.

Very Smartly Made.

"Point of No Return" is Marquand's popular story of a junior bank official who has bent himself toward creeping up the financial ladder until he now is within reach of the almost ultimate goal, a vice-presidency. When he reaches this point he discovers that it isn't really what he wanted at all—but it is too late for him to do anything but go on; in the ocean fliers' phrase, he has reached the point of no return. It is a cleverly made story which has a satisfying amount of praise of such cultural pursuits as book-reading and anthropology, and an ending which is happy enough in as much as the hero does win the vice-presidency and all that goes with it.

It is, in other words, a thoroughly professional work and a highly salable one which covers all the angles without pinning itself down to too strong a viewpoint on any one of them.

Fonda Splendid Again.

Henry Fonda, as the banker who has to do the climbing, is so good an actor that he never seems to be acting at all. He has the same appearance, the same delivery and the same voice he had in "Mister Roberts"—but this sameness is deceiving. He is not now a Navy Lieutenant, but a young man who came out of a small town near Boston, got hurt when he tried to marry into a snobbish family, married another girl and now lives in the right suburb and does the right things on his way to the top in a small, smug New York bank.

Right with him, as his wife and as an actress, is Miss Dana, giving another splendid performance. Conroy as the bank president, Cromwell as Fonda's father, Miss Smith as the older girl and Ross as an anthropolgist who takes Marquand's amused view of human striving are well chosen and well schooled for their roles. Mielziner's sets, ranging from the bank floor and a railroad car to three rooms in three houses, are fitting and fluid, permitting the changes of scene and time which are so easy in a novel to be effected on a stage with no fuss and strain.

There isn't any profound philosophy in "Point of No Return," for it is basically the familiar joke about keeping up with the Joneses—but it is highly satisfying theatre.

The New York Times

December 14, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

At last the professionals have returned to the theatre. "Point of No Return," which opened at the Alvin last evening, is an adult drama staged and acted expertly. Paul Osborn, who is an old hand at this sort of thing, has adapted the drama from the novel of John P. Marquand, who is an old hand in his own alley. And Henry Fonda bestows on it one of those unbelievably easy and engaging performances that do not seem like acting at all.

This is the drama of the hopeful young bank executive who is competing with a colleague of the same category for vice president of the revered Stuyvesant Bank. Mr. Marquand found in this saga a plausible satire of our whole system of American advancement. Out of American sterotypes he knows how to make things that are both poignant and true; and this slightly disinterested study of bank manners is one of his novels that touch American folkways most deeply.

* * *

Let's concede that Mr. Osborn has had a little trouble in making the novel fit the stage. "Point of No Return" is more of an adaptation than an organic work of art. It takes quite a lot of scenery, and it involves a few labored spots and some repetition of the central theme in the last act.

But that will suffice for criticism this morning. And it is a pleasure to report that the young bank executive and his wife are richer, more flexible and pleasant characters than they are in the novel. They are Charles and Nancy Gray. Since the job of vice president is soon to be filled, they are almost dying with anxiety, for the whole pattern of their future depends on this tactical point of advancement.

* * *

But they live agreeably. They have happy and lively children. And they love each other. They are tense but they have not been poisoned with ambition. The Grays are not puppets but humorous, sincere and likable young people.

The improvement in their morale in the theatre is partly the contribution of the actors. Mr. Fonda is our most ingratiating male star; and his effortless, modulated style of acting is a minor miracle. Without throwing anything away, he seems to lounge through a part on a bright current of placid good-humor. This is one of his clearest, most honest and winning performances.

In her first big role as Nancy Gray, the beguiling Leora Dana has suddenly become a fully developed actress. She gives a glowing, forceful performance that never is common, despite the fury of the ambition that is driving Nancy ahead. Although Nancy has a strong mind, Miss Dana has not left the simple humanity out of her heart.

Under H. C. Potter's direction, there is a lot of admirable acting in Mr. Osborn's expansive play. Frank Conroy's kindly though obtuse bank president; John Cromwell's sharp-tongued, contemplative Yankee; Patricia Smith's touching, tremulous New England maiden; Colin Keith-Johnston's rigid and heartless snob; Robert Ross' glib, penetrating anthropologist; Phil Arthur's loyal friend with modest ambitions — are all parts well played with assurance, compassion and variety.

* * *

Like a true professional, Jo Mielziner has mastered a complicated production and designed discerning sets that seem as relaxed and as pertinent as Mr. Fonda's acting. Main Bocher has designed costumes that have a related vitality of their own. For "Point of No Return" is sound, professional theatre work all the way through. It is also the first new play of the season that examines a mature idea about American life. Out of everybody's memories and everybody's experience, it creates a sharp, coherent and stimulating point of view.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

December 14, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

ONE of the characters in "Point of No Return" is an anthropologist, and he is a pretty good clew to what is going on at the Alvin. The American suburbanite, Connecticut breed, is being put on a glass slide under a microscope. His habits, hopes, and, above all, his fears at forty are dissected with painstaking clarity in a play which is part case study, part sly satire, and part conventional success-story stuff.

Charles Gray, home-owner, club-member, father of two—is exhibit number one. He is in line for a vice-presidency at his bank, and his working hours are spent in coddling female customers, competing with his ambitious associates, and "shining the boss' shoes." His home life, for all that he has a devoted wife and two handsome kids, is unbearably tense. Should he invite the boss to dinner? Dare he buy his boy a boat? Has he gone as far in a competitive and apple-polishing world as he is ever going to go?

* * *

Paul Osborn, in dramatizing John Marquand's novel, has got very close to Charles Gray. He makes you feel with him, and for him, and he gets genuine tension into a family spat over the breakfast table, into a telephone call, into a small but momentous dinner party. He has made his hero a man of innate honesty, a man who can recognize his grubby existence for what it is, and agonize over it. And Henry Fonda plays him with tremendous honesty.

The play is always arresting while it is pinning its desperately middle upper-class specimens to the wall. It captures the sycophantic atmosphere of a New York bank with edgy accuracy. It makes the nervous relationship between an understanding but prodding wife and a reluctant but committed husband very real. And when Charles Gray, in the third act, feels that he has lost his last chance at moving into the upper brackets he has geared his life to, you are sick with him.

"Point of No Return," though, has its faltering stretches. There is a long second-act series of flashbacks dedicated to helping us understand what sent Charles Gray into the rat-race to begin with. Here we trace an early love affair—as the ubiquitous anthropologist points out, it is one between a lower-upper class boy and an upper-upper class girl—which ends unhappily for very familiar and very conventional reasons. This is stock material, almost a one-act condensation of "The Heiress," and it is, for the most part, irrelevant. The most obvious thing about Charles Gray is that he needs no explanation. He is the average climber in our climbing society, a man so exactly like the rest of us that we recognize him at once. The extended background of the flashbacks is unnecessary and, compared to the rest of the play, humorless. It does some damage to an otherwise acutely observed way of life.

There are reservations to be made about the play's ending as well. The hero's moral struggle is rather patly resolved. He is, in the final analysis, permitted to eat his cake and have it, too—he gets the job and also keeps his integrity, we are told—and while this will no doubt make matinee audiences a great deal happier, it is a bit sugary for some of the more acid comment which has preceded it.

The play is faultlessly acted. Henry Fonda is convincing, amusing, and moving in turn as he struggles for a kind of success he does not really want. Leora Dana is fantastically real as the wife, who pushes, but does not want to push, her husband. Robert Ross has some shrewd and very funny moments as the anthropologist—his is one of the play's best performances—and Frank Conroy, Phil Arthur, Patricia Smith, Colin Keith-Johnson and John Cromwell are all first-rate. Mr. Cromwell is a special delight as Henry Fonda's philosophical, improvident father.

"Point of No Return" works a very narrow and very special vein, and sometimes works it a little thin. But it remains a consistently interesting evening in the theater. It is, on the whole, rather like its hero: lower upper class.

Journal American

December 14, 1951

Hayward, Fonda Have Another Hit

By JOHN McCLAIN

Leland Hayward, who has an almost objectionable list of hits to his credit during the past few seasons, last night added another, "Point of No Return," which opened at the Alvin Theatre with Henry Fonda, one of his most dependable thoroughbreds, in the number one post position.

Aiding Messrs. Hayward and Fonda in this venture were J. P. Marquand, who wrote a quite acceptable little novel bearing the same title; Paul Osborn, a gifted dramatist, who adapted it for the stage; H. C. Potter, a director of infinite taste and authority; John Cromwell, Leora Dana, Frank Conroy, Colin Keith-Johnston, Robert Ross and 10 or 12 other highly competent thespians; Jo Mielziner, not entirely unknown as a set designer, and no less a person than Mainbocher, who did the clothes.

It is gratifying to report that this staggering array of talent paid off. This is good theatre—a sound and understandable theme developed by a distinguished cast of players, aided by sympathetic direction and mounted with exceptionally good taste.

* * *

Relives Past

Marquand's story, which has not suffered by Osborn's adaptation, concerns the plight of Henry

Fonda, the forty-ish father of two, happily married and struggling to become the fifth vice-president of a New York bank.

Trouble is, it looks as though the appointment may go to the guy at the next desk. To Fonda and his wife this would mean total defeat—negation of everything they've been struggling for all these years.

At this juncture Fonda is sent back to his home town for the first time in 20 years, an official excursion in connection with the bank. There, in a flashback, we see the events which led to his current predicament—his romance with the local heiress, her father's objections, his determination to make enough money to override these barriers and her ultimate decision, when his savings are suddenly swept away, to turn him down and remain loyal to the old man. End flashback.

He comes home from this trip free from the fear that beset him. He no longer cares whether he is made vice-president or not, realizing that because of the unhappy experience in his youth he has ever since been crawling and apple-polishing his way toward success. It now seems infinitely important to be able to tell the president of the bank to go to hell.

Which is where "Point of No Return" comes in. When he does indeed get the job he can't tell anybody to go to hell.

He has a wife and a family. It's just too late.

• • •

Henry Fonda does all this wonderfully well, but he is given infinite support by Leora Dana who delivers one of the best performances of the season as his wife. There also is a magnificent scene or two by John Cromwell, who plays his father, and solid contributions from Frank Conroy, the bank president, Colin Keith-Johnston as the rich doll's pater and Robert Ross as a wacky anthropologist.

I thought H. C. Potter's direction was superb and Jo Mielziner's sets were imaginative and tasteful and never pretentious.

If I may be permitted a small carp (I'm not very hungry) I would suggest that a little could be cut out of the second act. You don't have to see Fonda's old man die and I don't see that the scene with his mother proved very much.

Yes, sir, I think Hayward's got another hit. Wonder if he'll ever get to the point where he gets no returns.

Daily Mirror

December 14, 1951

'Point of No Return' Has Compassion, Humor

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Leland Hayward opened a gold mine called "Point of No Return" at the Alvin Theatre last evening. Intermission rumors had it already pouring nearly $1,000,000, a new record for a legitimate attraction, into the Hayward till before the rise of the curtain in New York. This amazing advance sale is eminently justified.

Paul Osborn had done a remarkable job of condensing J. P. Marquand's perceptive novel of the same title into a delightful and rewarding script, which H. C. Potter has directed beautifully. You see Charles Gray yearning desperately to become vice-president of a Manhattan bank. He is willing to join the right clubs, to laugh at the boss's jokes, even to cringe a little when it's called for.

Then he is sent on business to the Massachusetts town in which he spent his boyhood. There you learn what has made him ambitious, what has made him step out of his pattern in life, what has made him a glorified "yes" man. Having taken stock of himself, he determines to become an individual, to speak his mind, to do what he really wants to do, no matter what the material cost.

Back at his home in Connecticut, Gray thinks he has lost not only the promotion but his job as well. And after the first shock has worn off, he is rather happy about it, even though it will mean less security, moving his family into a smaller house and sending the children to public school. Then he discovers that he is to be vice-president after all, but he accepts the assignment with newfound independence. He has recovered his integrity and self-respect.

Henry Fonda plays Gray with the straightforward honesty that the role demands. Shunning tricks, he achieves admirable emotional impact. Leora Dana is excellent as his attractive, affectionate, aspiring wife. Robert Ross is wonderfully amusing as a garrulous, enthusiastic, ruthless anthropologist.

John Cromwell, recaptured from Hollywood, etches Gray's father—a man with a gambling instinct and decent standards—with glowing warmth. Patricia Smith makes an auspicious debut as the girl who sent Gray searching for success. Frank Conroy gives one of his best performances as a stuffy but shrewd bank president. Colin Keith-Johnston is effective as a cold and selfish New England aristocrat.

Susan Harris, Keith Russell, Bartlett Robinson, Phil Arthur, Frances Bavier and Madeleine Clive are good in other roles.

"Point of No Return" is a thoughtful study of human nature and social codes. It probes deeply into what makes men behave the way they do, and it may even cause you to re-evaluate yourself. It has wisdom, humor and compassion. It is a distinguished contribution to our current theatre. Dont' miss it, even though you may have to wait months for your tickets. It's worth waiting for.

New York Post

December 14, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Season's Latest Hit Arrives

Some of the shrewdest professional talents in the American theater have made a brilliant, resourceful and enormously enjoyable dramatic entertainment out of John P. Marquand's best-selling novel, "Point of No Return." Paul Osborn's adaptation, which opened before an almost unbearably fancy audience at the Alvin last night, has the tremendous advantage of Leland Hayward's lavishly skillful production, including Jo Mielziner's fine sets and the immensely attractive performances of Henry Fonda and a splendid supporting cast, and the result is that comforting sense of well-being which is the commercial stage at its best.

"Point of No Return," as most readers of successful contemporary fiction must know, is the story of a young banker, who begins to question the values of his life and career just as he is on the verge of becoming a vice-president of his organization. He is worried by both his self-questionings and the ties that his early days in a small New England town have upon him, and it is only when he has gone back to that town for a brief stay and thought over his life in the light of his new doubts that he apparently manages to find himself. In large part, the play is the young man's spiritual pilgrimage into his own past.

Theatrical Skill

Having somehow missed Mr. Marquand's novel, I cannot tell you how faithful Mr. Osborn's play is to its original spirit, but, on the basis of my knowledge of some of the novelist's earlier work, I should say that it is reasonably close. That, however, is perhaps not of the greatest importance. What is important is that the adaptation is always alive, vigorous and completely entertaining in the theater, and that it is expert showmanship of a very high order. It is filled with scenes and characters and observations of American success ideals that never fail to hold the interest. Here is real theatrical craftsmanship, intelligently managed.

It is bound to be a great success, and it richly deserves to be, because such professional expertness is only too rare these days and should certainly be cherished. Let me confess, however, that, as much as I admire and enjoyed "Point of No Return" for what it sets out to be, I do not look upon it as a distinguished or important play. It is a little too smooth, a little too superficial, and a little too dependent on showmanship, rather than on deep creative imagination, for that. It is, I think, equivalent to an extremely skillful slick-paper magazine story, rather than to a literary masterpiece, but this is a description of it and not by any means a condemnation.

The Playing

Certainly there is no questioning "Point of No Return" as brilliant entertainment. Mr. Fonda, as the banker, may not ever quite indicate any great inner turmoil of spirit and he seems at the end of the play just about what he was at the beginning, but his portrayal has all the charm, directness, earnestness and vast likeableness that he invariably gets into his performances. And Leora Dana, as the wife, plays with a depth, integrity and honesty of feeling that I had somehow never found in her much-praised earlier appearances in the theater. There is a quality of decent humanity in their work that couldn't be more engaging.

In addition, there are some exceptionally delightful characterizations in the lesser roles. John Cromwell, as the young man's intelligent, erratic and luckless father and Robert Ross, as an anthropologist studying the [illegible] customs of a New England town, have two of the most charmingly written parts of the season, and they manage them with what I can only describe as brilliance. Frank Conroy is splendid as a very human bank president, and Colin Keith-Johnston and Bartlett Robinson are particularly good as a snobbish father and a pushing bank employee, respectively. "Point of No Return" merits the popular success it is bound to have.

"Lo and Behold!"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

December 13, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

JOHN PATRICK seems to me to be a genuine humorist. The author of "Lo and Behold," at the Booth, has a highly individual wit and off-beat slant on the process of making people laugh which can double an audience up in sudden merriment. Furthermore, Mr. Patrick does not manufacture his laughs, or at least you rarely catch him in the process of laboriously contriving a set-up. When he does strike fire, he does so spontaneously, and this is a rare gift in an age increasingly dominated by radio and television gag-files.

But Mr. Patrick is—and here is the depressing news—still fooling around with the more obvious, gauche, and all but amateur plot twists which intrigue the theatrical novice. Last season he was squandering his belly-laughs on a play about lunacy. Now he is wasting them on ghosts.

• • •

"Lo and Behold" is primarily a love story presided over, and commented on, by a houseful of unwelcome spirits. It begins promisingly. An elderly, diet-ridden author who is skeptical about moral values but interested in psychic phenomena is looking about for a handy method of polishing himself off. One turns up in a temporary housekeeper, young, pretty, and dim-witted, who innocently serves him a lavish meal. He eats it with suicidal relish and promptly passes away. While Leo Carroll, as the writer, and Lee Grant, as the charming ignoramus, are exchanging their philosophies of life—in short, while the play is concerned with people rather than perverse and antic spirits—the dialogue is bright and the mood delightful.

• • •

Enter the ghosts, Mr. Carroll returns to haunt his own house, hoping to establish contact with a young doctor whom he has befriended. But his plans are upset when three other supernatural visitors arrive, and it is here that the author falls into hopelessly conventional patterns. One of the newcomers is an Indian squaw, one a concert pianist, one a fanciful southern belle. These are stereoyptes, the first notions which come to any author's mind, and it is thereafter possible to anticipate nearly every attitude they will strike. In all fairness to Mr. Patrick, it must be said that he freshens them intermittently. The Indian, who was once pushed off Lover's Leap and who has been working on the same wicker basket for the last fifty years, has some explosively funny lines, and Doro Merande reads them for all they're worth. Cloris Leachman, as the 'liberal' daughter of the old South, has her moments, too. When she explains how she stood in front of her lover and dared a villain to shoot her first—and the villain did—she is enchanting.

• • •

But the company have only isolated lines to work with. As characters, they have nowhere to go, and their persistent interruption of the budding romance between the young doctor and the hopeful housekeeper is more irritating than amusing. No scene can be played straight through while the chattering ghosts are on hand, and, as a result, the play steadily loses momentum and warmth.

The Theatre Guild has done handsomely by it. Stewart Chaney's setting is one of the season's richest. The always reliable Leo Carroll is on hand to make the waspish author a figure of wit and cultivation. His look of gratification as he downs his first good meal—and his last—in forty years is a production in itself. Lee Grant is an actress who can be amusingly birdbrained and honestly appealing at the same time, and you feel that she might have made the love story very winning if she'd ever been left alone on stage with the man. Jeffrey Lynn handles the relatively pale role of the doctor with an uncommon amount of assurance, and it is a relief to watch a leading man ingratiate himself with an audience without an overabundant display of teeth.

When John Patrick gets past his absorption with the merely eccentric and begins to lavish his talents on something reasonably down-to-earth, he is going to write a nice, fat hit. Even "Lo and Behold" is resoundingly funny at times.

"LO AND BEHOLD"

Comedy by John Patrick; staged by Burgess Meredith; setting and costumes by Stewart Chaney; presented by the Theatre Guild at the Booth Theatre, December 12, 1951. The cast:

Milo Alcott.....Leo G. Carroll
Mr. Wingate....George Englund
Daisy Durdle.....Lee Grant
Dr. Robert Dorsey..Jeffrey Lynn
Minnetonka Smallflower.....
Doro Merande
Kenneth Moore.....Roy Irving
Honey Wainwright.....
Cloris Leachman
Jack McDougal...Paul Crabtree

Synopsis: The action of the play occurs in the library of Milo Alcott's home. The time is the present.

DAILY NEWS

December 13, 1951

'Lo and Behold' Has Funny Lines, Good Performances, Wobbly Plot

By JOHN CHAPMAN

John Patrick's new comedy, "Lo and Behold," is funny enough to make me wish it were funnier. Its idea is amusing and so are the players, and Patrick has learned the trick of inserting a big, solid laugh line at the right moment. But the story is quite wobbly and not always convincing, with the result that a play which might have been very good is only pretty good.

"Lo and Behold," which the Theatre Guild presented last night at the Booth, is about ghosts. Leo G. Carroll, playing a misanthropic and successful author who has been an invalid for 40 years, commits suicide very pleasantly by eating himself to death. But, before deliberately enjoying the first square meal he has had in decades, he has carefully arranged his estate. So much for his young doctor, who is named executor; so much for the Harvard Law School—on the theory that all Harvard lawyers would defend his sanity in case his will should be contested—and the remainder for keeping his house just as it is, but unoccupied, forever.

No Place Like Home.

For Carroll has figured it out that if there is a life after death, he might as well stay in his own home—and he does. A formidable and proper old gent, he is outraged when some homeless ghosts move in on him—an Indian squaw who was pushed off a cliff some time around the Battle of Bull Run; a Southern belle from the plantation days who got shot by a lover, and a young musician who also met an untimely end.

For real, live human folks in the play there are Jeffrey Lynn, as the doctor; Lee Grant, as a substitute housemaid in the home of the late Mr. Carroll, and Paul Crabtree, an admirer of Miss Grant's who is a bookmaker and a heel.

Good Performances.

There is a lot of good humor in the mixup between the ghosts and the concern they show over a romance between Miss Grant and Lynn. The romance itself is the weak part of the comedy, for the author never got around to deciding just what kind of people—or, even more simply, what people—these two characters should be.

Carroll gives another of his impeccable performances as the departed author, bending all his skill toward creating a character. Miss Grant is grand as the housemaid, and Doro Merande is immensely funny as the squaw ghost. Cloris Leachman plays the Southern lass too broadly, perhaps, but she is lovely to look at and has been provided with some good lines. There is a good set, not too ghostly, by Stewart Chaney.

Burgess Meredith directed the play, and if he had thought of himself as an editor as well as a counselor of actors, he might have persuaded Mr. Patrick to strengthen and tighten his story line.

"Lo and Behold!"—*continued*

The New York Times

December 13, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

So far this seems to be the week set aside for enjoyable first acts. In "Lo and Behold!" which the Theatre Guild put on at the Booth last evening, John Patrick has written a neat, original and acidulously amusing first act; and Leo G. Carroll and Lee Grant act it with style and distinction.

Mr. Carroll plays the part of a sagaciously cynical man of letters who is about to die and has arranged a code with his doctor to experiment with communication from beyond the brighter side of the Pearly Gates. Miss Grant plays the part of cheap and humorously garrulous housemaid with a good heart and a silly head.

* * *

Mr. Patrick, still fondly remembered as author of "The Hasty Heart," has written the first act at the top of his form. Fresh in its point of view, it is comic, familiar and pleasantly reflective. It is always a pleasure to see Mr. Carroll moving quietly around the stage and speaking his lines with a skeptical disinterest. His portrait of the fussily-imperious man of letters is one of his most delightful jobs.

And Miss Grant is the perfect foil. Unsure and uneasy, she speaks in an amusing vernacular and manages somehow to preserve a genuine characterization. The girl she plays is cheap, but there is nothing cheap in Miss Grant's discriminating acting.

* * *

Everything looks fairly blissful throughout the first act. But in the second act it appears that Mr. Patrick is interested in something of a more commonplace nature. He starts writing a gag farce about four ill-assorted spirits who have invaded the dead author's house and kibitz the living. While the housemaid fights off a racketeer and makes love to the author's chief heir, the spirits wander around the room, bicker among themselves and discuss what they are seeing and hearing.

Although Mr. Patrick has provided a number of snappy retorts that are funny, the last two acts are on a lower plane than the first, and they do not provide a satisfactory play. The engaging character of the worldly man of letters is pushed into a corner of the story, and the random wisecracks of the spirits are not much compensation.

If Mr. Patrick can portray characters as skillfully and effortlessly as he does in the first act, he has talent worth respecting. He does not need to write like a bright sophomore, as he did in "The Curious Savage" last year, and as he does in the last two acts of "Lo and Behold!" this year. In the eerie world of talkative shades, he cannot compare with Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit," which is still tops in that shivery field.

* * *

Although Burgess Meredith's direction is perceptive in the first act, it is just about as shiftless as Mr. Patrick's craftsmanship in the rest of the play. There is some agreeable acting by Jeffrey Lynn as the romantic swain, and some funny dead-pan clowning by Doro Merande as a deceased Indian maid. Cloris Leachman and Roy Irving make something fairly entertaining out of the other spirits. Paul Crabtree gives a casual performance as the gangster.

Thank Stewart Chaney for scenery, lighting and settings that solve some of Mr. Patrick's supernatural ideas. But so far the art of drama has not got so much beyond good first acts this week.

Daily Mirror

December 13, 1951

'Lo and Behold!' Combines Farce and Fantasy

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "Lo and Behold!", which the Theatre Guild brought to the Booth Theatre last evening, the talented John Patrick has sought to combine farce and fantasy. It is difficult enough to sustain fantasy, but almost impossible to work it into counterpoint with farce. The two are essentially alien.

The new arrival has to do with a Nobel Prize Winner who has lived for many years on a meagre, unpalatable diet, to favor an ailing heart. This very lack of much heart has made the philosophy in his books coldly cynical. After signing a will that leaves a third of his estate to his young docter, a third to perpetuate his house as a sanctuary for his spirit and the final third to the Harvard Law School to insure that the terms of his odd testament will be carried out, he eats a sumptuous meal and dies happily.

Instead of the solitude he had expected to find in one of Stewart Chaney's tasteful living rooms, he is beset by the spirits of an Indian girl pushed off a cliff by her lover, a Southern belle with a disturbing drawl and a phony liberal attitude, and a frustrated composer.

As if this weren't enough to annoy the soul of an aesthete, the pretty cook (a former model) who had prepared the fatal dishes, returns to the house and is mistaken for his illegitimate daughter. The author eventually finds peace in furthering a romance between the doctor and the imposter.

Leo G. Carroll is delightful as the ultra-civilized writer. Lee Grant, a most versatile actress, is excellent as the dumb model with a kind heart and a desire for marriage. Jeffrey Lynn gives another of his straightforward, likeable performances as the susceptible doctor. Doro Merande, Cloris Leachman and Roy Irving are highly amusing as the intrusive shades.

To Miss Merande, of the dead-pan delivery and the whiny voice, fall the choicest wisecracks, and she capitalizes on every one in her own inimitable style. Paul Crabtree does well by a chubby, jazzy heel. And George Englund has a few nice moments as a meticulous apprentice attorney.

Burgess Meredith has directed the play's two facets with skill. If he is not always successful in blending its contrasting moods, it is the fault of Patrick. This promising dramatist has a tendency to take the easy way out when challenged. His characters are usually colorful, his situations novel and his dialogue bright.

But he doesn't appear to grapple deeply enough with taxing problems. Rather, he settles for the obvious. He grabs too quickly for the clever line even though it may strike a wrong note. He has, in our opinion, yet to realize his fine potentialities as a playwright.

"Lo and Behold!" could have been a wonderfully enchanting and diverting fantasy. Instead, it is a muddled script with intermittently entertaining and jarring sequences. It has a goodly quota of hilarious moments, but they are too readily come by. It has so much to recommend it that we can only regret it hasn't quite enough.

New York Post

December 13, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

A New Comedy About Some Ghosts

Comedy ghost stories present difficulties on the stage, and, save for Noel Coward's delightful "Blithe Spirit," I don't think I have ever been completely happy with any of them. John Patrick's "Lo and Behold!" which the Theater Guild offered at the Booth last night, is no exception to this rule, and it certainly is not the play I keep hoping for from its talented and enterprising author. But it does have its points as popular entertainment, and, if you are not quite as captious an observer as this sullen reviewer, you might conceivably enjoy it.

There is, for one thing, no doubt that Mr. Patrick can write a good comic line when he is in his best form, and there are stretches of dialogue in his new play that are genuinely amusing. He can think up an entertaining humorous character, also, and he has provided "Lo and Behold!" with two of them in the phantoms of a coy Southern belle, who firmly believes she has a liberal outlook on race matters, and of a slightly antique Indian maiden, who confesses that she didn't jump from Lover's Leap, but was pushed. I enjoyed both of the girls.

Prize-Winning Phantom

On a number of other occasions in his new comedy, Mr. Patrick manages his material amusingly, and it is not often that his narrative becomes downright dull. But he isn't, I fear, consistently entertaining or always inventive, and his story of the aged Nobel Prize-winning author, who expects to be left peacefully alone in his old home after his death, but finds that his house is overrun with stray ghosts looking for a place to haunt, has a way of getting into the doldrums all too frequently. It is likewise my impression that this central phantom is a rather unpleasant character, with considerably more petulance than charm.

After this gentleman's death, at the end of the first scene, there are only three live characters in

the play, and, of course, the somewhat nosey ghosts try to settle their problems for them. The Indian, the Southern belle and a deceased piano player are on the side of young love and the late intellectual is against it, until a villainous interloper and time for the final curtain combine to bring even the Nobel Prize-winner around to grudging virtue. I wish the whole enterprise had been a bit funnier.

Place to Haunt

I must repeat that Mr. Patrick has a number of interesting points to bring up. The sight of Doro Merande, who plays the Indian with her customary original humor, emerging from the fireplace in the haunted house is, for example, something to both frighten and entertain you. And the thought that there are so few satisfactory houses left to haunt these days that ghosts are driven to extremes to find a good one is an idea worthy of the speculation of a comedy playwright. There are, in fact, so many pleasant things in the play that I wish the final effect were happier.

Under Burgess Meredith's skillful direction, the performances are all that could be hoped for. Leo G. Carroll, an invariably able actor, does everything possible as the dead writer, although he never could convince me that the old fellow's books had ever amounted to much. Miss Merande, as always is a delight in her role, and Cloris Leachman plays the Southern belle with humor and charm. The living are properly portrayed by the engaging Lee Grant as the heroine, Jeffrey Lynn as the hero and Paul Crabtree as the villain. "Lo and Behold!" is intermittent fun.

Journal American

December 13, 1951

4 Ghosts and Play Fall Short of Mark

By JOHN McCLAIN

You start playing around with ghosts and you're apt to get yourself into a lot of trouble. They can give you humor and pathos and they can deliver wonderful asides but they can also become unwieldy.

If you're going to use them at all you've got to be sure that they're a believable and intrinsic part of the story you're telling. The device is as old as Sophocles but with improper manipulation it can still fall on its face.

There were four ghosts thrashing around the stage of the Booth Theatre last night, where the Theatre Guild, Inc., presented a new comedy by John Patrick entitled "Lo and Behold" and in my opinion they didn't justify their non-existence.

If you're going to use them at all they ought to pay off big, and in this case I'm afraid they fell somewhat short of the mark. I didn't think they were that funny.

They Fall in Love

The proceedings in which they are involved concern the demise of an invalid author, played by Leo G. Carroll, and the complications which result when his executor erroneously believes Lee Grant, a part time maid, to be his child and beneficiary. The executor and the girl naturally fall in love.

The four ghosts are: the deceased writer, a Southern belle, an American Indian girl named Minnetonka Smallflower and an unhappy young composer.

The late author had stipulated that his home be preserved as a private haunting ground and the other three ghosts were merely blown in by a favorable wind. Thus you have a romance blooming in the presence of four wraiths whose comment and presence are apparent to the audience but not to the two lovers.

It keeps the stage well cluttered with people and makes everybody nervous for fear somebody will make a miss-step and jostle one of the ghosts.

Acceptable Comedy

It also provides a lot of very acceptable comedy.

Miss Doro Merande, as the Indian squaw, is given innumerable caustic lines which she delivers with great effect in her famous fashion and Cloris Leachman, as the You-all doll, evoked an equal share of mirth with a highly romantic reaction to the charade, thus adding to her stature as a coming comedienne.

The composer, played by Roy Irving, was certainly adequate. But one wonders if this timeless trick—the ghost routine—is thus adequate for an evening.

In the big parts Leo Carroll, an experienced actor, struck me as being too conservative.

I thought he could have been a lot busier about the premises, once he had become a ghost. Lee Grant fulfilled her promise, portraying the role of the maid, but I'd like to see her in a part that gives her a wider scope. Jeffrey Lynn, as the young doctor, was charming, forthright and amiable. I approved of Paul Crabtree as the heavy but, again, it was just another heavy.

Burgess Meredith directed the show able, considering what he had to work with. Four ghosts.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 13, 1951

'Lo and Behold' —It's Delightful

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

One of the most agreeable plays to turn up in a long time is "Lo and Behold!" which the Guild premiered last night at the Booth.

This is comedy in an endearing mood, far afield from the frantic machinations of high pressure gags that constitute so much modern entertainment.

"Lo and Behold!" is often just a light play, well plotted, with something to say, but out to shatter nothing. Over and over its wit spins in rising spirals that end in explosions of delight at the characters and their fantastic situations.

Bevy of Ghosts.

Most of the evening is devoted to the efforts of a bevy of ghosts to settle the love life of a young man and woman who encounter hazards in the path of true love.

A famous erudite author has innocently left to a temporary serving girl a legacy which makes it irresistibly easy for her to pretend she is his illegitimate daughter. This makes her partial heir to this Nobel Prize winner's fortune.

She falls in love with his doctor. The ghostly band is divided in its efforts to promote this match, and later to save her from a dastardly blackmailing bookie. The dead author has frequent trouble advocating his theories about literal ethics and the wisdom of compromise. But in the final analysis everybody, dead or alive, seems appropriately contented. This includes those out front as well as those in the play.

Despite the way the billing is arranged, it seemed to me the ladies' evening. Leo H. Carroll is gently and testily a delight as the dead author and Jeffrey Lynn is everything anyone could want in the way of a sensible, handsome, believable hero.

The play's color, however, lies mainly in the female roles. Lee Grant plays the would-be heiress with unfailing vividness and warmth. She is Cinderella with modern salt and pepper, independent but dreamy, forceful but alluringly feminine.

Miss Grant acts with dimensions and fire. She is particularly winning in the scene where she and the ghostly band are trying to get the doctor to break down and kiss her.

Happily Roled.

Doro Merande is happily feathered in a role peculiarly suited to her own comic style. She is a wandering Indian maid who once was helped off Lover's Leap, now looking for a place to camp.

Cloris Leachman is quite terrifyingly sweet and superficial as a Southern belle who is condescendingly "liberal" on her own terms. She floats about exquisitely and drops nuggets picked from a maimed intellect.

Burgess Meredith has directed the play with loving, quizzical touches as the ghosts try with occasional luck to help along the destinies of the living.

"The Grand Tour"

New York Post

December 11, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Trip to Europe With Elmer Rice

Elmer Rice provides a sentimental journey through France, Switzerland and Italy in his latest play, "The Grand Tour," which opened at the Martin Beck Theater last night. Since Mr. Rice is a dramatist of intelligence and integrity, his new work possesses the sort of sensitive sincerity that must be admired and respected.

Nevertheless, although travel is said to be broadening, I am afraid that his account of an idealistic school teacher's European pilgrimage is a rather slender fable that never quite manages to achieve more than a mild glow of wistful romance.

While it certainly is not Mr. Rice's intention, I must confess that at first I found his play a trifle deceptive. At least, I thought that "The Grand Tour" started out as if it meant to be an amiably satirical story about American innocents abroad. The intelligent but naive teacher, whose father had left her some money, shows up at a tourist office to arrange for her eagerly awaited first journey to Europe, and the dramatist offers the kind of humorously observed detail that he can always manage so persuasively.

Shipboard Encounter

When the young lady meets on shipboard a handsome, sad and fairly mysterious American banker, whose wife is divorcing him, the scene seemed set for a happy romance between the wistful travelers. At this point the play shifts from its realism and goes in for a highly impressionistic account of the innocents' tour of Paris and pilgrimage to Chartres, in the course of which Mr. Rice gives quite a bit of guide-book information on history and architecture. By the time the voyagers have reached Montreux, however, it is clear that other matters are afoot.

I suppose we should have been warned when the dramatist has his heroine express tearful admiration for the famous sacrificial gesture of Sydney Carton. Anyway, while she is in Rome, the young lady finds that the handsome banker, in addition to being an embezzler, is still in love with his ex-wife, whereupon, if you will forgive me for giving away so much of the plot, she sacrifices both her fortune and her love for him. It is no doubt quite splendid of her but it doesn't make for the most stimulating of romantic tragedies.

It is my impression that, for the type of dramatic travelogue which Mr. Rice apparently had in mind, a great deal more variety, depth, vividness and pungency in the writing were demanded than are to be found in "The Grand Tour." Instead, despite its sincerity and moments of wistful charm, the play is, on the whole, curiously sparse and lacking in dramatic or emotional force. It kept seeming to me that the author was intending to show some interrelation between the shifting European background and the American lovers and was achieving only a mild sentimental spree.

The playing is believable enough, but it rarely manages to be particularly interesting. Beatrice Straight is direct and pleasant as the school teacher, and Richard Derr, in a considerably less rewarding part, is generally convincing as the well-meaning embezzler. The only other role of any importance is that of the wife, and Louisa Horton, as always, plays it with sincerity and directness, although there is really little she can do with it. Howard Bay's settings are properly atmospheric. "The Grand Tour" presents Mr. Rice in a minor vein.

"THE GRAND TOUR"

Play by Elmer Rice; staged by Mr. Rice; settings by Howard Bay; costumes by Motley; presented by the Playwrights' Company at the Martin Beck Theatre, December 10, 1951. The cast:

Mr. Montgomery....John Rodney
A Female Traveler.....
Claire Justice
Nell Valentine..Beatrice Straight
A Male Traveler.....
Maury Tuckerman
Raymond Brinton...Richard Derr
A Deck Steward....Sam Bonnell
Professor Coogan.....
William A. Lee
Harvey Richman..Edwin Jerome
Adele Brinton....Louisa Horton

Journal American

December 11, 1951

Does Not Justify The Elaborate Effort

By JOHN McCLAIN

The Playwrights' Company last evening presented at the Martin Beck Theatre a new play by Elmer Rice called "The Grand Tour" which I found to be regrettably confused and loquacious and neither sufficiently humorous nor moving to justify the elaborate effort.

It is up to Beatrice Straight and Richard Derr to handle most of the proceedings; I thought Miss Straight succeeded admirably with a part which I never entirely believed but I have certain reservations about Derr. Maybe it was a case of miscasting — in any event he failed somehow to interest me deeply in his deplorable predicament.

It seems that Derr, vice-president of a bank in Minneapolis, has illegally thrust his arm into the bank's till to the extent of about $60,000. He has simultaneously and, I thought, rather unaccountably found his married life going to pot.

His answer to all this is to take passage for Europe aboard the Ile de France with the idea of doing a half gaynor over the side in mid-ocean and ending it all.

This program is interrupted, however, by the appearance aboard the same ship of Miss Straight, a red-headed school teacher out of Bridgeport, Conn., who has just inherited about $60,000 and is setting forth on her "Grand Tour" after all these years up against the blackboard.

The very first thing she wants him to do is to handle her money for her. But of course he won't do that. He might rob the bank, but he's too noble to put the chew on a doll.

So they go to Paris and have a wonderful time and then, in the shadow of the Cathedral at Chartres, they realize they're in love. But now she is noble. She runs away to Switzerland.

Of course he catches up with her and tells her the whole horrible truth and says he'd like to marry her if he weren't a crook. She says that's exactly why they should get married and, furthermore, why doesn't he take her money and bail himself out of his troubles? He still says no. Marriage, yes. Money, no.

From this point onward I became increasingly bewildered. They are going to be married in Rome and seem to be insanely happy, although it is obviously a matter of minutes until the law catches up with him and he is led off to the bastile.

When the law does arrive, in the person of the attorney for the bank, she privately offers to settle the whole matter with her legacy, but just as this solution seems imminent the divorced wife also turns up and convinces Miss Straight that she is still desperately in love with her recently divorced husband.

Miss Straight thereupon slips quietly away from the whole situation and resumes her tour.

Last time you see her she is back in school telling the kids about the enlightening results of her trip to Europe.

I thought Miss Straight did nobly with an enormously wordy and sometimes tedious role; Louisa Horton brought depth and sincerity to the part of the ex-wife, and William A. Lee contributed some solid laughs in his brief appearance as a half-loaded professor.

As I said, I never quite believed that Richard Derr had either looted the bank or seriously considered suicide. I never even understood what his divorce was all about.

Otherwise, the sets by Howard Bay were ingenious and extremely simple and effective. As director Mr. Rice did as well as he could with what he had written.

But what he wrote does not, in my opinion, add up to a hit.

The New York Times

December 11, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

In "The Grand Tour," which opened at the Martin Beck last evening, Elmer Rice breaks the heart of an enchanting school teacher from Connecticut. Before the final curtain comes down he also breaks the spirit of some theatregoers. For the first half of "The Grand Tour" is a slight but tender travelers' tale, acted with admirable sensitivity by Beatrice Straight. And the second half is as tasteless as a pulp magazine thriller. Stereotyped in writing and plot, it is no fair gauge of the mind and character of one of our ablest playwrights.

* * *

That sort of conclusion is more than commonly regretful. For the introductory scenes are original and promising. They tell the story of a New England schoolteacher who is starting off on her first tour of Europe with the money from her father's life-insurance. Both in the writing and the acting she is a beguiling creature—conventional in her habits, but valiant and humorous and full of pertinent knowledge.

Mr. Rice has written many more powerful acts in his time. But the first half of "The Grand Tour" catches him in a particularly engaging mood. The touch is light; the tone is gay and discursive; the writing reflects Mr. Rice's own fondness for travel. He is not snobbish about his tourist. No doubt he, too, likes the savory facts and figures of the wonders of Europe and the simple delight of being away.

* * *

So far, very nice indeed. But now comes the plot, and that is done in a less imaginative vein. Inevitably, Mr. Rice's school teacher falls in love, although it is less inevitable that she has to fall in love with a Minneapolis bank embezzler. That experience brings out the noblest qualities in her character. But it drains all the magic out of "The Grand Tour."

Money is a terrible thing in almost any department of life. But it is the bogey man of the drama, for it brings everything down to a dead level. In the case of "The Grand Tour" it very rapidly destroys the innocent romance of an attractive first act, and traps Mr. Rice in some tawdry writing.

Miss Straight's shiningly rapturous acting as the schoolmarm is "The Grand Tour's" brightest asset. The role is remarkably garrulous, but Miss Straight acts it from the inside out with humorous excitement, and once or twice she makes it touching. In the second act the play leaves her with nothing but a few odds and ends of hokum to go on, and this is not the best time for her, Mr. Rice or the audience. But when Miss Straight has something imaginative to portray, she brings to it a loveliness of spirit that is captivating.

* * *

As the young man, Richard Derr is a good deal more literal. He is a handsome actor with an excellent voice, but his acting in this play is pretty formal. Mr. Rice, who has served as his own director, is not much interested in the other parts. With the exception of John Rodney and William A. Lee, the other actors do not make much out of them.

Howard Bay has designed a whole portfolio of travel sketches for scenery without revealing much style of grace. Marion Wright has provided Miss Straight with an entrancing wardrobe for polite touring. Too bad that such a promising grand tour gets bogged down in a second-rate bank embezzlement. Both the schoolteacher and the audience deserve more fun on their holiday.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 11, 1951

'Grand Tour' Best At Its Simplest

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Much of "The Grand Tour" is warm and winning and rare, so much, in fact, that when it gets plotty and its complexities make it artificial, you feel deserted by a loving friend.

This is almost a two-character play. In the entire first half no third person means anything to the romance. A schoolteacher sets out on a trip around Europe on some insurance money, meets a handsome young man and falls in love with him.

You find out a good deal about both of them. The important content though, of this act is the simple wonder and the growing ecstasy of the woman, as she savors love without letting it consume her.

Too Much Plot.

Elmer Rice clearly found this strict clarity impossible to sustain beyond the intermission. It seems a pity that in striving to inject new, tenser interest in the play, he should have had to employ so much narrative.

Suddenly in a rapidly increasing flood, there is introduced seduction, adultery, divorce, embezzlement, recrimination and sacrifice. It is too much to keep up with. The characters who have stood up so well on their own, tremble and all but collapse under the weight of elaborate events.

In the theater today we have more versatility and even more vigorous authority than we do any true lyricism of acting style. Beatrice Straight has the rare gift of gentle, romantic, melodic personality, which projects with complete honesty.

Marathon Role.

Her current role is a real marathon. She literally never stops talking, and wisely relies on complete sincerity to hold your interest rather than trying for great variety. It is a penetrating performance and an artful one, since it succeeds in the tricky task of making a virtuous woman who has no particular wit, both engaging and interesting.

Richard Derr does nobly by the object of the teacher's affections. The play demands that he too act with complete simplicity. The character of the banker is essentially passive. You feel he has been pushed into everything he ever did. Derr makes him personable and sadly charming, which is all anyone could ask.

Louisa Horton has a starchy scene as the banker's wife, and Edwin Jerome plays his nemesis.

Daily Mirror

December 11, 1951

'Grand Tour' an Amiable But Spotty Drama

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "The Grand Tour," which the Playwrights' Company brought to the Martin Beck last evening, Elmer Rice has penned what amounts to a two-character play. There are a few minor roles, but they merely serve to cover the spots usually filled in with phone calls and off-stage voices in similar works.

It is an amiable little play which fairly cries out for intimate quarters. It merely rattles around in the big Martin Beck. It is at its best when it goes humorous or sentimental. It is rather trying and ever embarrassing in its melodramatic moments.

"The Grand Tour" is concerned with a New England schoolteacher, past her first youth, who inherits a small fortune on the death of her father. She determines to go abroad in style before settling down on her modest income. En route to Europe she meets and falls in love with a banker from the Middle West.

The banker, father of two young children, is being divorced by his wife in Reno. Teacher and banker, lonely both, join hands to enjoy the sights. And, in Rome, they decide to marry when he receives his final decree. Even though she has learned from him that he has embezzled $60,000 from his bank to maintain a standard of living beyond his means.

In the end, the teacher brings husband and wife together again, persuades them to accept her legacy to make restitution and avoid jail for him, then goes back to her classroom, richer in memories and experience.

Teacher and banker really see Europe through Rice's eyes. He is a wise and sometimes witty guide. He's done extensive reading, and he isn't backward about sharing his authors with you. They range from Thorstein Veblen to Henry Adams. It's something like taking the Grand Tour with a set of Dr. Eliot's Five Foot Shelf. And that's not bad, though it has become fashionable to lampoon both.

Beatrice Straight plays the hopeful, pedantic Nell Valentine, who gets more from her trek than she expected, with an earnest charm. Richard Derr, whom we liked so much in "The Traitor," seems ill at ease as the absconding Raymond Brinton. He must find him as stodgy

and unconvincing as we did.

William A. Lee offers an entertaining interlude as a tipsy ornithologist, and John Rodney is good as a patient travel agent. Edwin Jerome and Louisa Horton make brief and casual appearances as a lawyer and the wife.

And that's the trouble with the latter part of "The Grand Tour." It tries so hard for a chin-up, decent, emotional viewpoint that it becomes static and stilted.

Rice's direction isn't very helpful, except in the case of Miss Straight, and she's a resourceful actress on her own.

"The Grand Tour" starts off buoyantly and then trips over its high-mindedness. It is like a bottle of champagne that pops promisingly but pour flat.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

December 11, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

ELMER RICE learned how to write a play a long time ago. Time was when he knew, and applied, the principles of exciting manufacture for the theater, piling scene upon scene for variety, pace and tension. Lately, however, he has taken to improvising his plays, letting them amble along in a placid and confiding manner. Somehow or other he has assumed the role of benevolent grandfather, chatting with his audiences instead of trying to stimulate them, and this latter-day mood leaves his newest play seriously becalmed.

In "The Grand Tour," which opened at the Martin Beck last night, Mr. Rice has first of all chosen to tell a very small story. He is concerned with a simple, though straightforward, spinster schoolmarm who sails for a European holiday, falls in love with a gentlemanly embezzler, surrenders him to his wife and—one gathers—the police, and returns to her Connecticut classroom.

Had this fragmentary little episode been given a wealth of charming detail, or even a reasonable measure of stage invention, it might have come to cameo-like life. But Mr. Rice wants to tell it as casually as he has outlined it. He wants his characters to sit placidly on the stage and ramble away in intimate and discursive conversational style, smiling and nodding now and then, occasionally hinting at emotional undercurrents, but generally rising to nothing more animated than a pace about the deck. "The Grand Tour" has the curious effect of being read aloud, in a library, at tea-time.

* * *

In addition to the dramatic lassitude which has overtaken him, Mr. Rice has been unfortunate in the physical production which he, as director, and the Playwrights Company, as producers, have contrived. Though the play is primarily concerned with just two people, and though most of the time they have nothing more than a table and two chairs to work with, they have been backed up by gigantic and boldly painted drops. There is no doubt that Howard Bay has made these handsome to look at; but they dominate and dwarf the already fragile activity beneath them. The final effect is hollow and cavernous. There is a painted ship whose sweeping and heroic lines would have been eminently suitable for a production of "Billy Budd;" beneath it, Beatrice Straight and Richard Doerr, as the casual acquaintances of the play, fight a losing battle for attention.

Miss Straight is a handsome and accomplished girl. At the opening of the play, when she is excitedly planning her first wild fling, there is a fine glint in her eye, and she makes you feel you'd like to come along. At the close of the play, she has a touchingly ironic moment in which, to the accompaniment of illustrated slides, she describes her summer to her students without any mention at all of the things that have really happened to her. Between times, however, there is little she can do to overcome the perverse listlessness of Mr. Rice's droning play.

* * *

Richard Derr, as the young banker who is running away from his own failure, is a great deal less effective than Miss Straight. There are possibilities for some dramatic tension here, suggestions of despair and renewed passion beneath the surface. Mr. Derr, unfortunately, leaves them beneath the surface. His is a stiff and mechanical performance.

William A. Lee has a bright few minutes in the first act as a festive ornithologist, and Louisa Horton manages one very short scene, late in the play, with some authority. But "The Grand Tour" profits little from these brief flashes. It is Elmer Rice in a reminiscent and garrulous mood, monopolizing the party with a long and indulgent account of the last time he saw Paris.

Kerr Is Named Drama Critic

Walter F. Kerr, who has been guest reviewer for the fall theater season, today becomes the Herald Tribune's regular drama critic.

DAILY NEWS

December 11, 1951

Elmer Rice's 'The Grand Tour' Is Sentimental but Not Theatrical

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Elmer Rice, a man of the theatre, also is something of a novelist, and I think he crossed himself up somewhat by writing "The Grand Tour" for the stage. This play, produced last evening by the Playwrights' Company at the Martin Beck Theatre, is a piece of sentimental fiction which might be better if read than it is as acted.

Not that the performances are bad, though. As one of the two principals Beatrice Straight offers an appealing portrait of a schoolteacher on a holiday and ripe for romance, and as the other leading actor Richard Derr is manly and honest. But what happens to them as they follow one another about on a Summer trip through Europe is not substantial or convincing enough—or absorbing enough—to be compelling theatre. As a novel, "The Grand Tour" would be better.

Unexciting Complications.

Miss Straight, an actress with physical charm, intelligence and a lovely voice, plays a not-too-young schoolma'am who is having her first holiday abroad. Having inherited a bit of money, she is making this tour first-cabin. On the boat she encounters Mr. Derr, an upright young banker who, having misappropriated some of the bank's funds, has taken the luxury liner in order to jump off it. Between the Narrows and Rome, with stops in Paris, Chartres and Montreux, love develops—a love strong enough to impel Miss Straight to offer Derr her inheritance to bail him out.

The complications the author has contrived include a divorced wife of Derr's who comes to take him back, and a noble gesture of renunciation on the part of Miss Straight—but somehow these complications are not very exciting. Too much of the play is exposition—such as Derr's long story about how he wanted to be a forest ranger instead of a banker—and too little of it is event.

Howard Bay has done some delightful backdrops for the nine scenes of "The Grand Tour" and Mr. Rice has staged the play much as he staged "Dream Girl," which was a great deal more effective theatre. There are other characters and other players in "The Grand Tour," but they are met only casually as Miss Straight makes her trip from a school in Bridgeport back to a school in Bridgeport once more.

"The Constant Wife"

Daily Mirror

December 10, 1951

Cornell Makes a Gem Of 'Constant Wife' Revival

By ROBERT COLEMAN

There's no use talking, times have changed. When we saw Ethel Barrymore in Somerset Maugham's "The Constant Wife" many years ago, we didn't think much of the play. It seemed to us a rewrite of J. M. Barrie's "The Twelve-Pound Look," with sex substituted for purpose.

But there were ever so many more theatres then, and America was in a literary ferment. We were blessed with riches. It was not difficult to find anything you wanted in the way of theatre in those days, from the frivolous to the profound. It was a wonderfully booming and bright era.

Saturday evening we caught "The Constant Wife" again, at the National Theatre, and with actress-manager Katharine Cornell heading what today we call a stellar cast, it seemed a veritable gem. It had a sparkle, a wit, that have been sadly lacking recently along our Rialto. It even made Maugham a dramatist of acute perception.

The Maugham comedy, as you may recall, has to do with an even-tempered, civilized wife who refuses to throw tantrums or make scenes upon learning that her husband is having an affair with a giddy young friend of hers. After all, it came as no surprise, and firery emotions had been absent from his hearthside for the past 10 years.

A woman of pride, Constance Middleton takes a job with an interior decorating firm, and proceeds to earn her keep. This, over the protests of her conventional husband, the eminent Dr. John Middleton. No longer "a kept woman," she then announces to him her intention to recapture romance in Italy with a former admirer who has returned to England from the Far East for a vacation.

Furthermore, the constant Constance informs him, she will return home after her adventure. Stunned at first, the furious Dr. Middleton wants none of such an arrangement. He cannot understand this violation of the single standard, but reluctantly and somewhat fascinatedly eventually agrees to her startling proposal.

"The Constant Wife" is the kind of play the British do so well. It is high comedy that flirts on the surface with serious emotions, while refusing to take them seriously. It is heady, brittle, brilliant stuff, which must be exposed with shimmer, verve and impeccable style to be entirely effective.

The members of the current cast bring to the production varying styles, which director Guthrie McClintic has been unable to blend consistently into the mood of the script. However, Miss Cornell, always, we think, more at home in drama than comedy, gave a performance as the amazing Constance that succeeded in delighting the first-nighters.

Grace George, one of our truly distinguished comediennes, dominated several scenes with her quietly polished, yet incisive characterization of Constance's old-fashioned mother. Brian Aherne made his weight felt, as the blustery, rather obtuse surgeon. He was better, we thought, as the frustrated husband than as the gay deceiver.

Eva Leonard-Boyne and Gertrude Musgrove brought a welcome lift to lesser roles. Nan Martin, John Emery and Claude Horton did well with their opportunities.

Miss Cornell is an admirable influence in our theatre. A great woman and a magnetic personality, she has taste and integrity. By reviving "The Constant Wife" with the best available talents she again places us in her debt.

"THE CONSTANT WIFE"

Play by W. Somerset Maugham; staged by Guthrie McClintic; setting by Donald Oenslager; presented by Katharine Cornell at the National Theatre, December 8, 1951. The cast:

Mrs. Culver.....Grace George
Bentley.....Liam Sullivan
Martha Culver.....
Gertrude Musgrove
Barbara Fawcett.....
Eva Leonard-Boyne
Constance Middleton.....
Katharine Cornell
Marie-Louise Durham....
Nan Martin
John Middleton, F.R.C.S....
Brian Aherne
Bernard Kersal....John Emery
Mortimer Durham.....
Claude Horton

Synopsis: Constance Middleton's drawing-room, Harley St. London.

New York Post

December 10, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

Charming Revival of Maugham Play

Miss Cornell, in an engagingly frolicksome mood, brightened the season Saturday night by bringing a deft, charming and attractively acted production of Somerset Maugham's expert comedy, "The Constant Wife," to the National Theater. The eminent actress-manager is in splendid form, playing with even more than her accustomed humor and warmth, and, surrounded by an excellent company, in which the unfailing Grace George sparkles with particular brightness, she gives new freshness and vitality to the play in which Ethel Barrymore scored a hit a quarter of a century ago. The result is an evening of extremely satisfactory entertainment.

For one thing, it is most comforting to listen to Mr. Maugham's crisp, graceful and civilized prose style in the theater again. "The Constant Wife" is neither deep nor subtle, and it clearly stems from a day that possessed an enviable, if unjustified, sense of order and well-being that is almost fantastically allen to us, but there is something immensely cheering about its professional expertness, its well-bred gayety, and its urbane spirit. There may be nostalgia in its spell, but, chiefly, it is the wit and dexterity of the writing, the sharp, sure craftsmanship of a brilliant dramatist, that makes the play so much fun.

Debonair Spirit

As in most first-rate examples of the polished comedy of manners, "The Constant Wife" hasn't a great deal of plot, or even a great deal to say. It is the way of saying it and the debonair spirit behind it that supply the entertainment. All that Mr. Maugham had to tell us was the reasonably familiar story of the loyal and gracious wife who accepts without flinching the knowledge that her husband is having an affair with a younger woman. His heroine is tolerant and understanding, but not conspicuously long-suffering. She is perfectly willing to let her spouse have his fling, but it does give her an idea about having one of her own.

In such a comedy, the style is everything, whether in the writing or in the acting. With Mr. Maugham in his most polished and smiling mood, there is no doubt about the rightness of the high-comedy tone. Where this production of his entertaining play is so happy is that the acting matches it. All of the players, I think, have captured just the right spirit of sophisticated charm and brightly brittle humor, and Guthrie McClintic has directed them admirably. Everything seems to be just as it should, including, in particular, Donald Oenslager's handsome interior setting, which supplies the perfect background for the Maugham wit.

Grace George

Not since her incomparable wartime "Candida" has Miss Cornell revealed the sense of warmly human humor that she shows as the wise and triumphant heroine of "The Constant Wife." And it is well that she does, since otherwise the superb comedy sense of Grace George might have forced her into a minor role in the proceedings There is no one in the theater who knows the value of a comedy line the way Miss George does, or can get so much out of the slightest humorous inflection, and she is a complete joy as the wife's undisturbed mother. The play would be well worth seeing if only for her guileful brilliance.

Brian Aherne, whom I had not thought of as an expert comedian, is tremendously funny as the somewhat pompous and completely baffled husband. Gertrude Musgrove plays the wife's catty younger sister with just the right note of amiably malicious humor, and Nan Martin, who made her debut last season in "A Story for a Sunday Afternoon," reveals a charming sense of satirical comedy as the husband's idiot sweetheart. John Emery handles the somewhat thankless role of the wife's faithful admirer excellently, and Eva Leonard-Boyne, Claude Horton and Liam Sullivan help out in the minor parts. "The Constant Wife" is an engaging fun.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

December 10, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

Katharine Cornell and a company of immaculately polished performers have brought grace and wit to a ragged season. They have had to go back to 1926, and Somerset Maugham, to do it, but in "The Constant Wife" they have found a comedy of high and delectable humor.

They have also found one of surprising durability. Though the play which opened at the National on Saturday night takes place in an amiable and idle world which has all but vanished, and though its concern with the marital etiquette of the well-to-do might easily seem rarefied stuff for these more rugged times, it has, miraculously, lost nary a laugh over the years.

"The Constant Wife" was Mr. Maugham's worldly and impolite comment on the double standard and the inequities it created in fashionable marriages. His heroine, Constance Middleton, is perfectly aware that her husband is unfaithful to her. But she is not the least bit bitter. She considers that, in their affluent circumstances, she has had no other function to perform than that of stimulating his desire, and that, once she has ceased to attract him, she has also ceased to have any reasonable claim on him.

Pursuing this interesting—and economically faultless—logic, she first determines to make herself financially independent, in order to pay her fair share of the room and board, and then to take off on an affair of her own, leaving an astonished husband to stew in a virtuous outrage.

Mr. Maugham's cynicism was impudent and knowing in 1926 and it is engaging now. The intervening seasons have made it more of a lark than an object lesson, more a work of whimsical fancy than a pertinent examination of a pressing social problem. It has, in fact, a dream-world quality about it these days, as though the way of life represented by Donald Oenslager's luxurious setting and by the confidently mannered performances of the actors had been the pleasant invention of a romantic story-teller. Whether it is because we are so pleased to be in such obviously comfortable company or simply because Mr. Maugham's epigrammatic verve had a good bit more substance to it than any one thought at the time, "The Constant Wife" continues to play beautifully.

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Miss Cornell, of course, has a lot to do with this. We have been starved lately for the kind of theatrical presence she brings to Constance Middleton—a part which once served Ethel Barrymore—and it is freshly gratifying to watch an actress command the stage without chilling it, or make an imperious gesture without making an ostentatious one. It is impossible for Miss Cornell to fluff a pillow without revealing real and magnetic authority, and since a lot of pillows get fluffed before Mr. Maugham's conversation piece winds down, this is lucky. The combination of grand manner and great warmth is exhilarating.

She has, as is her wont, surrounded herself with first-rate people. Grace George, always an enchanting actress, is delightfully dry as her solicitous but worldly-wise mother. Miss George has only one opportunity to indulge her frantic stammer, and since she is the best frantic stammerer in the business, this is perhaps a shame. But she is a joy throughout the evening.

• • •

Brian Aherne is extremely funny as Miss Cornell's errant, easy-going, and endlessly obtuse husband, and he makes something of a tour de force out of a difficult last-act scene in which he must react pompously and explosively to his wife's cool proposal that he wait at home for her while she conducts her own experiment in infidelity. The scene calls for a delicate balance if it is not to collapse into broad and blustering farce; Mr. Aherne manages it neatly, never losing a laugh and at the same time preserving the controlled comic style, caustic and imperturbable, of the play as a whole.

Eva Leonard-Boyne, Nan Martin, and Claude Horton play their peripheral roles with relish. Gertrude Musgrove is a shade strident here and there in the part of a nosy sister, John Emery may be unnecessarily grim as the man who has waited twenty years to run off with Miss Cornell, and Guthrie McClintic has let some nervousness creep into the proceedings while the first act is getting past its old-fashioned exposition. But these are minor qualifications about an evening that is meticulously staged and ingratiatingly performed.

"The Constant Wife" is no doubt something of a period piece, a handsome and faintly exotic curio. But it is, in its implausible and well-bred way, great good fun.

Journal American

December 10, 1951

Comedy Provides Rare Good Time

By ROBERT GARLAND

When, a quarter of a century ago, W. Somerset Maugham's "The Constant Wife" was new, I found it a superior modern comedy. Ethel Barrymore played the title role. And played it beautifully. She was supported by Aubrey Smith, as the husband, and Frank Conroy, as the other man.

Then, it was at the Maxine Elliott. Night before last, it was put on at the National. Katharine Cornell was in Miss Barrymore's role. And she was supported by Brian Aherne and John Emery. Grace George was also in the revival, one of a hand-picked cast.

In 41st st., "The Constant Wife" remains a superior modern comedy. As a matter of fact, it is better than I thought it was. Guthrie McClintic has staged it with fondness as well as skill. And Donald Oenslager has set it in less than showy taste. Its overall effect is fine.

The second first-audience thought so, too. It had a rare good time. It laughed when it was supposed to laugh. It did not laugh when it was supposed not to laugh. It said that here was a play that did everybody credit, Everbody, including the happy onlookers.

For "The Constant Wife" is not dated . I do not pretend to know how much has been done to it. But not much, I think. Mr. Maugham writes this time about human nature. And human nature is one of the things that do not change. A constant wife is a constant wife in 1951 as in 1926.

Blind Loyalty

Constance has been married to John Middleton for any number of years. He is a successful surgeon in London's Harley st. And, as far as you can hope to know, a successful husband. He and she have been living together in wealth, health and harmony, you think.

But you soon learn that you are mistaken. Everybody but Constance talks about how John is carrying on with Marie-Louise, a married friend of Mrs. Middleton's. Constance, apparently, does not know. Constance is blinded by loyalty and affection. And living under firm control.

Bernard Kersal comes along. He is an old lover of Constance. An old lover who still loves her. He has been away, loving several women. But not enough to marry them. After his fashion, he has been true to the lady he left behind. He has avoided the altar.

There you have—or W. Somerset Maughan has—a somewhat different triangle. Especially when you become aware of Constance Middleton's knowledge of John's unfaithfulness. And of her lack of love for John. The difference is that Constance has not been unfaithful.

Women, says she, are not unfaithful. Not as a general rule. But, in "The Constant Wife," Constance Middleton goes off on a trip with her old lover, promising to return if John so desires. He so desires. So she goes, without benefit of clergy. But with blessings

Fun for Adults

That is the outline. No retelling of the story can more than hint of the wit of the conversation, the wisdom of the action. Or, for that matter, the smoothness of the entire goings-on. This is adult fun-making.

Katharine Cornell is perfectly fitted to the role of Constance Middleton. She is at ease, beautiful to look at and easy on the ear. Comedy, especially high comedy such as this, seems to be her forte. It is as if it had been written tomorrow and she meets it half way.

Grace George is back again and I am glad. Miss George, as the constant wife's mother, is a delight. She makes Mrs. Culver, who would rather be right than consistant, her own. Skillful, quiet and always on the ball, new timers can learn about acting from her.

Brian Aherne is sure of himself as the inconstant husband. John Emery is as he should be as Bernard Kersal, third member of the triangle. Nan Martin is purposely thick as Marie-Louise. Too thick, really. Eva Leonard-Boyne is Barbara Fawcett through and through.

But this is Katharine Cornell's play. And a superior modern comedy. Miss Cornell, without stealing anybody's thunder, makes it her own. Quite a while has passed since she has had so right a vehicle. No one should be happier than the original, Ethel Barrymore.

The New York Times

December 10, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Pay very little attention to the ensuing comments. For the production of Somerset Maugham's "The Constant Wife," which opened at the National on Saturday evening, has brought Katharine Cornell, Grace George and Brian Aherne together on one stage and it thoroughly delighted the ladies and gentlemen who attended the first performance.

Miss Cornell is one of our great ladies. Since she has been having more than her share of bad luck with new scripts these past few years, it is a pleasure to see her in a civilized comedy, wearing modish costumes and presiding over the affairs of a fashionable household with queenly taste and authority.

* * *

Miss George's luck has been a little more obliging; she had a pleasant career in "The Velvet Glove" two seasons ago. But her good luck is no reason why she should not enjoy the skill, charm and impish humor with which she is now playing the sapient mother in Mr. Maugham's wry comedy—really a capital performance. As the bumbling but polished husband to the constant wife, Mr. Aherne also is playing with subtlety and animation; and he works up the final scene into a storm of boorish temper and amusement.

But this is the place in today's bulletin where the perverse opinions emerge. Mr. Maugham's drawing-room comedy, first played here in 1926 by Ethel Barrymore, is an expert example of the cynical, worldly and malicious. It is the story of a cool-headed English woman who startles her relatives by protecting her husband when he is caught in infidelity with one of her closest friends. Having carried through this crisis, she creates a crisis of her own a year later by going to Italy for a month's holiday with a man who has loved her like a gentleman for twenty years and will love her like a human being as soon as they get away.

"The Constant Wife" is in the great tradition of artificial comedy. It is hard and metallic. The satire of manners and morals is impious and witty. The characters are like glittering puppets with the graces of smart society and no hearts. Possibly Mr. Maugham's topsy-turvydom is a little more mechanical than it was a quarter of a century ago, but the literary style is still urbane and the wit is still barked, adroit and professionally insincere.

As an actress of artificial comedy Miss Cornell is cursed with honesty. Her constant wife in an inconstant world is overwhelmed with warmth and feeling and by being frank and sincere, and also very beautiful, she translates Mr. Maugham's malicious comedy into a romantic drama, which is quite a different thing. The qualities that make her admirable keep her from being really at home in the crisp and brittle world of sin that Mr. Maugham inhabits with so much style.

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Like all the Cornell productions, staged by Guthrie McClintic, "The Constant Wife" is opulent and accomplished. Donald Oenslager has housed it in a perfectly designed and royally embellished drawing-room, and the costumes are gorgeous.

John Emery plays the devoted lover with romantic fervor; and Gertrude Musgrove, Nan Martin, Eva Leonard-Boyne and Claude Horton act subordinate roles agreeably. On Saturday evening the audience felt very happy about everything and was elated to be in Miss Cornell's company again. Pay no attention to the churlish notions expressed above by a reluctant drama dragon.

DAILY NEWS

December 10, 1951

Katharine Cornell's New Vehicle Is Maugham's Old 'Constant Wife'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The many admirers of Katharine Cornell's cool and detached method of acting may now find her at the National Theatre in a comedy suited to her style, Somerset Maugham's 25-year-old treatise on man's infidelity to woman, "The Constant Wife." The opening occurred Saturday night.

It is a very nice production with a stylish set by Donald Oenslager, several attractive players—the darling among whom is Grace George—and direction by Guthrie McClintic, who keeps his actors walking around so much that at the opening a few of them seemed to have developed charley horses. I have an idea that "The Constant Wife" seemed brighter and more daring in 1926, when it provided a much-needed vehicle for Ethel Barrymore; Saturday evening it struck me as a warmed-over "Candida" with Miss Cornell in her accustomed role.

Sauce for the Gander.

This constant wife of whom Maugham speaks is the spouse of a handsome surgeon (Brian Aherne), and said surgeon has been playing house with the wife's best friend. Apparently everybody knows about this scandal except the wife, but it turns out that she has known about her husband's infidelity all along and has not considered it very important. However, to make a neat little play out of the thing she must do something, so in the end she goes on a holiday to Italy with John Emery, who has been in love with her for 20 years.

Maugham doesn't crackle and sparkle like most drawing-room authors; he just gets on with it. He has one of those butlers, of course, who periodically opens the double doors in the upstage wall, announces "Mr. Kersal" or "Mrs. Durham" and is all but trampled by an actor eager to get onstage. Everything is nice and polite except when, in the evening's only fit of temper, Aherne shouts to the butler, "Oh, go to hell" and the impeccable servant replies (laughter), "Yes, sir."

Miss George Effective.

In the last act Aherne does manage to get some physical vigor into the play as he discovers that he is no longer a shamefaced philanderer but an outraged husband. Miss George, with her dainty grace and those expressive big eyes, plays admirably as Miss Cornell's wise and tolerant mother. Emery is always the perfect gentleman in his two decades of devotion to Miss Cornell, and other roles are fairly adequately filled by Eva Leonard-Boyne, Nan Martin, Gertrude Musgrove and Claude Horton.

I suppose that Miss Cornell's large body of worshipers will find "The Constant Wife" a satisfactory vehicle for their star, and will call down upon me the wrath of Jehovah for regarding both the comedy and the actress as pallid.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 10, 1951

Stage Is at Its Best With 'Constant Wife'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Katharine Cornell's new production of "The Constant Wife" is a rarity in the season. Quite simply, here is a cast of expert actors, beautifully presented, in a literate, civilized play.

The Maugham comedy was first done here just 25 years ago by Ethel Barrymore. While its years show, it bears them well.

This is the story of a wife's revenge. She is perfectly aware of the fact that her husband is having an affair with one of her friends, long before her relatives and acquaintances break the news.

Face-Saver.

She is called on to save face for all concerned. The gallantry with which she passes off this difficult moment only further endears her to an old beau.

In the end we find her staking herself to a vacation on money she has earned, and wilfully telling her mother, sister and husband, that she will be accompanied by her swain of long standing.

The way the last act is now played, there is no doubt in anyone's mind that the wife means just what she says. Curiously, this approach leaves Miss Cornell in a position where ironclad, watertight sympathy is hers, regardless, or because, of infidelity.

In the same spot, Miss Barrymore seemed infinitely more wicked, because she left the impression that she had wilfully deceived her husband about an infidelity she had no intention of consummating.

Dodges Pitfalls.

It is a case of complex vengefulness against honest immorality, and the latter suits Miss Cornell in the role. She plays with very simple warmth, in a gentle mellow manner that lets the laughs come

"The Constant Wife"—*continued*

as pleasant surprises. There is no straining after effects of any kind.

The star avoids all the pitfalls inherent here, of being too elaborately gracious, too obvious or arch, or even of seeming to have too good a time. Any such attitude would skim the play out the window as dated nonsense. Miss Cornell is honest and aware, so you believe her and her comedy.

The people seem to live in aspic. If you stop to analyze them. They are taking their morals out of curl papers to peruse and discuss them with an egotism that the war has made unfashionable.

Excellent Cast.

The incredibly good cast aids Miss Cornell in keeping all this alive and entertaining, in a placid laughable way. Miss Grace George plays the mother with unmatchable innocent understanding. She is the essence of gentle propriety until her witty points score like steel-tipped arrows.

Brian Aherne is perfection as the self-centered husband, and John Emery hits exactly the right note of heroic if frustrated romanticism as the wife's prospective lover.

Nan Martin is remarkably good as the husband's mistress, and Gertrude Musgrove, Eva Leonard-Boyne, and Claude Horton all add characterizations in perfectly appropriate key.

"Nina"

The New York Times
December 6, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Andre Roussin's "Nina" differs from all other French farces in one respect: It has a wonderfully ingratiating part for Alan Webb. This is the play that Gloria Swanson said she would like to leave a fortnight ago. After the opening performance, which took place at the Royale last evening, it is easy to see why. While Mr. Webb and David Niven romp happily through the evening, she has to play the tenacious woman they would like to escape.

* * *

Miss Swanson is a handsome, vigorous actress; she acts a stock part in a stock farce with considerable authority, and gives the landscape a good shaking up whenever she barges on stage. But Mr. Webb has the only part worth mentioning and, with a fine show of sprite-like whimsey he plays it well enough to take your mind off the plot. M. Roussin is really not interested in the character Miss Swanson has to portray.

* * *

"Portray" is a fairly solemn word to use in this connection. It implies that "Nina" has genuine quality, which is far from the case. For M. Roussin and Samuel Taylor, the adapters, have gone through the ancient dance of the husband, the wife and the lover with a meek respect for the banal. Their plot and most of their workmanship are astonishing even in a season that has cultivated banality assiduously. Think of the exhausting effort and the talent squandered on this hackwork; Charles Elson's genteel set of a bachelor apartment in Paris; the splendid gowns, the smart gents' furnishings, the stunning dressing-robe that Miss Swanson and Mr. Webb wear in alternation. Gregory Ratoff, celebrated throughout Christendom, has taken time off to direct it.

If the rest of "Nina" were as fresh as Mr. Webb and his part it would be worth all this profligacy. He is a fussy, proper little bureaucrat who envies and finally venerates his wife's lover. In the first scene he comes prepared to shoot the lover. But the longer he remains the more infatuated he becomes with the lover's talents and the more enthralled he is with the whole convention of infidelity.

* * *

Three seasons ago Mr. Webb won everyone's devotion with his quiet, moving performance as the resolute father of "The Winslow Boy." In its somber reticence it was one of the theatre's little masterpieces. Now Mr. Webb is on a holiday, and he is very funny. Imagine an educated Willie Howard and you have some notion of his approach to the part of the crackbrained but engaging fool in "Nina." He has thought out every episode and given it a grimace, a pose or an inflection that is spontaneously comic.

His whimsical cuckold is a rich piece of inventive acting that deserves a better play; and Mr. Niven goes along with him pleasantly. Once Mr. Niven astonishes the audience by demonstrating how a gentleman folds a suit for packing—a very intricate and rare accomplishment. Like Mr. Webb's irrepressible skylarking, it helps to keep your mind off the deficiencies of M. Roussin's three-act cliché.

"NINA"

Comedy by Samuel Taylor, adapted from Andre Roussin's French play; staged by Gregory Ratoff; setting by Charles Elson; presented by John C. Wilson and H. M. Tennent, Ltd., at the Royale Theatre, December 5, 1951. The cast:

Gerard.....David Niven
Adolphe.....Alan Webb
Nina.....Gloria Swanson
M. Redon-LaMur.....
William Le Massena

Synopsis: The scene is Gerard's bachelor apartment in Paris. The time is spring.

New York Herald Tribune
December 6, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

Now that actresses have taken to reviewing their own shows from out of town there is not too much work left for a drama reporter to do. Gloria Swanson is said to have announced from Philadelphia that the lines in her current vehicle, "Nina," were bad. She is quite right. She is also reported to have complained about the stage direction of Gregory Ratoff. Here again she is on solid ground. And she has further been quoted to the effect that her understudy could play the title role as well as she. While we have had no opportunity to check on this interesting suggestion, it is possible that as a critic, Miss Swanson has scored a solid bull's-eye.

For, in spite of the attractive star's undeniable talents, and much as all of us would like to see her exciting comeback go right on coming back, it must be said that Miss Swanson is at sea in "Nina." She plays a managing femme fatale who likes to think of herself as juggling husband and lover simultaneously. But she plays the part without any attack at all. She falls back on familiar mannerisms, she gives bittersweet readings through clenched teeth, she makes strong and abandoned gestures, she runs her voice up and down the scale in varied cadences, and everything she does is both meaningless and monotonous. There can be no doubt that, following upon her Philadelphia outburst, Miss Swanson has settled down to do her level best. But she is obviously an actress who needs firm guidance, and since she has not got it in this instance, her best is just not good enough.

"Nina" is one of those French frolics—which we seem to adapt and imitate so badly—in which the eternal triangle is subjected to rational examination. Shortly after the curtain goes up at the Royale, Nina's husband confronts Nina's lover with a revolver. He has come to do his duty as a protector of the social order. But he has, unfortunately, a cold. He must hand over the gun to the lover while he fetches the necessary medication out of his pocket. Nina arrives—the locale is the lover's Paris apartment—and the husband conceals himself behind a bar. When he is finally discovered, Nina responds with wifely solicitation for his health. In fact, she beds him down immediately in her lover's apartment.

This sort of thing—the reduction of romance to the absurdly commonplace—is always possible when it is written deftly, directed wryly, and played with genuine manner. But Samuel Taylor, earlier responsible for an engaging comedy, "The Happy Time," has not located whatever acid, or whatever impudence, there may have been in Andre Roussin's original play. And Gregory Ratoff has staged the proceedings so lamely as to leave the actors floundering in a morass of words and a tangle of ordinary stage business.

David Niven, as Nina's lover, does not suffer so much as Miss Swanson from the limp and uncertain tone of the production. He is a pleasing and precise performer, and in another part I am sure Broadway will be glad to have him around. Here he is wasted on interminable telephone calls to his various mistresses and long, windy speeches in which he attempts to free himself of the tarantula-like Nina. It is an indication of the quality of the evening that Mr. Niven drew a solid round of applause for the skill with which he packed a suitcase.

One of the actors did survive the otherwise dismaying evening. Alan Webb, a slender, shredded man who is going to be exactly right when they get around to dramatizing the cartoons of James Thurber, is an island of delight in an ocean of ennui. He plays Nina's mildly outraged husband, and when he is slyly, and with the best of motives, busy poisoning his wife, or when he is delighted to be mistaken for a roue himself, he is terribly funny. He makes a genuine comic characterization out of crumpled dignity, and, though he serves a lost cause, "Nina" is much in his debt.

Miss Swanson has designed her own costumes for the production, and the extent of her misfortunes can be gauged by the fact that one of them came apart on stage. By that time, however, a similar fate had overtaken the play.

Daily Mirror

December 6, 1951

'Nina' Is a Frail Farce With Clever Cast

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Though "Nina" is a French sex farce, there is mystery attached to it. The mystery is why John C. Wilson, a producer of taste, and H. M. Tennent, Ltd., which represents the best in England, decided to offer it in New York. Many members of a dressy first-night audience in the Royale Theatre last evening chuckled happily, and applauded appreciatively.

We, however, could share their enthusiasm only intermittently. That is, for the play. Though we had unbounded admiration for the skill and courage of Gloria Swanson, David Niven and Alan Webb, who acted it as though they were really in something worth doing. Webb, particularly, won the fancy of the audience.

Looking like a frustrated leprechaun, he bounced about the stage, using his expressive features to wring laughs from lines and situations into which author Andre Roussin had not penned them. Webb was impersonating a mousy little man, an official in the French Ministry of Finance and a peripatetic drugstore.

He had come to the apartment of his wife's lover, Gerard, to shoot him. Instead, he caught a frightful cold, and was put to bed in his would-be-victim's flat. Here, he gleefully listened in on Gerard's telephone conversations with other women, developed a fondness for the engaging philanderer, and decided, instead to poison his unfaithful spouse.

Like his earlier lethal attempt, this one backfired. In the end Gerard packed for a flight to Mexico and escape from the possessive Nina, but a truck ran him down and sent him back into Nina's clutches.

Niven is charming as the worldly Gerard, and Miss Swanson delightful as the relentless Nina. But to Webb falls the best part, and he certainly makes the most of it. William Le Massena is effective in a bit, that of another betrayed husband.

Gregory Ratoff's direction and Charles Elson's smart setting are other assets.

"Nina" is a frail bubble of a farce. We were kept in a constant state of suspense, fearing that a good breeze would sweep into the Royale any minute and blow it right off the boards. But to its credit, the clever cast kept it intact and safely in the theatre for three tenuous, vacuous acts.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 6, 1951

'Nina' No Bargain To Gloria Swanson

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Nina" must be classified as a bedroom farce, though it takes place in a living room, and is rarely farcical.

It is a triangle story, without pattern or direction, trying to get by on contrived situations and smart lines.

Nina's husband comes to kill her lover. Twist number one is that he is humiliated at being discovered by his wife, who declares him dangerously ill and slaps him into bed.

The two men spend their time commiserating with each other over Nina's possessiveness. They alternately volunteer to die, and eventually make a pass at poisoning her instead.

Sometimes Funny.

Sometimes it is very funny indeed. More often it is just endlessly talkative. In this performance no one can tell whether the English script is witty or not. I suspect not. However, this play is fluff, sophisticated, sexy fantasy. And it is put on like the melodramas in which Paramount's leading ladies used to fight grimly over George Brent.

Gloria Swanson has no more business in this sort of play than she has in a jute mill. She seems to have discovered this, vociferously, before the premiere, but is now resigned, and acts with patient calm.

This may not be ideal, but she can do more pantomimically than most people can with lines, even when they are good. Watch her, for instance, as she seems to growl as a gent by biting hard on something that is not there.

A Minor Crisis.

She is dressed most fetchingly in her own designs, one of which created an extemporaneous crisis last night. A whalebone worked into the position of a bloomless corsage, inciting the most distracting and audible audience chatter for several minutes, until the star was able to snatch it out of her bodice.

David Niven similarly excited a prolonged discussion from the audience by packing a jacket so expertly that he might well have been demonstrating in a school for gentlemen's gentlemen. He has no technique for this kind of comedy in the theater, and looks willing and uneasy in equal parts.

Alan Webb has brilliantly funny moments, usually dreamed up by himself, in a madly Chaplinesque style, as the husband. He is quite lunatic, terribly defenseless and charmingly gay as a Milquetoast engrossed in delicious idiocies.

His love affairs with a quilt and a telephone are unforgettable clowning. Praise will be conspicuously his, and by no means entirely because he is the only person connected with "Nina" who seems to understand what the original play was trying to be.

Journal American

December 6, 1951

Backward Material For Broadway Play

By ROBERT GARLAND

Despite an agile performance by Alan Webb, "Nina" is backward material for a Broadway offering. Programs at the Royale call Andre Roussin's imported play a comedy. It is nothing of the kind. When all is said, re-said and said again, it is an old-fashioned bedroom farce.

An old-fashioned bedroom farce set in Gerard's bachelor apartment in Paris. There is a husband whose name is Adolphe. And a wife who lends her name to the title. And a fourth side to the triangle known as M. Redon-LaMur. He has been added for reasons known to the adapter.

They work diligently, do Alan Webb, David Niven, Gloria Swanson and William Le Massena. But only Mr. Webb comes off. He, one of England's esteemed players, will be remembered as the troubled father in "The Winslow Boy." There, he was also very, very good. And memorable.

It seems, in West 45th Street, as if the other players were resigned and let him have his way. And have his way he does! Under Gregory Ratoff's direction, he makes the show his own. No that it is anything to begin with. But "Nina" would be in a fix without his fooling.

Even with his fooling it is nothing much to rave about. Avery Hopwood could have written it in the good old days. As a matter of fact, he did. And under several different titles. He even turned a living room into a bedroom to lend a touch of novelty and chic.

Not to strain a point, "Nina" is the one in which the unmarried man is a great lover. At least, he talks a great love affair. Or two, or three, or four. From all over Paris women call him on the telephone.

Visibly, Gerard is engaged with Nina. Nina is the wife of Adolphe. The wife, I fear, in name only. For Adolphe is more concerned with powders, pills and potions than he is with love. In scene after scene after scene, this is quite undoubted.

So concerned with his powders, pills and potions is he that he decides that Gerard, whom he has come to kill, had better stay alive and live happily ever after with Nina. He will die. He, Adolphe. But not for long. Or for certain. Or for any good reason.

As the play goes on from act to act, the men become the best of pals in Gerard's living room